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AUTHOR Menken, Kate
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to determine the norms and rules of behavior in a multi-ethnic seventh-grade classroom in an inner-city school. Data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews with the teacher. The teacher in this class stressed ethnic pride, and because the majority of the students (as well as the teacher) were African-American, an Afrocentric viewpoint was included in appropriate areas of the curriculum. The teacher also stressed that students needed to respect each other, enforcing rules concerning turn-taking and politeness. The teacher corrected students when they used Black English Vernacular (BEV) during formal classroom situations, but allowed them to use BEV when talking among themselves in informal situations. (MDM)

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ED 372 613

Ethnic pride and the classroom: An ethnographic study of classroom behavior– norms and themes

Kate Menken

University of Pennsylvania
Graduate School of Education

Observed behavior is now recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules, and the task of ethnography is seen as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group; in other words, culture is what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community. (Saville-Troike, 1989:7)

As Saville-Troike points out, one of the goals of an ethnographic study is to understand rules for appropriate behavior, and thereby gain an understanding of culture. `Ethnography of schooling'[1] is particularly interesting because many of the rules for appropriate behavior are given to the children in the form of classroom rules or commands by the teacher. Delineating the rules that exist offers information about the behavior that a given school community feels a child must master. Because schools have taken on the function of socializing children into our culture, they are also targeted for creating social change (Wallerstein, 1983; Freire, 1990).

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to understand the norms and rules of behavior in a given classroom in combination with course content, and thereby to shed light on the social change that the teacher hopes to induce (Saville-Troike, 1989:8). Mehan states, "The language of the classroom is a cultural code, the mastery of which is important for school success and, by implication, for status attainment" (1984:179).

When students do not master this code, however, they perform poorly in school. This limits their life chances for success. Ethnographies of schooling have explained why this happens by showing that there is often a mismatch between the 'cultural code' at school and the ways students are socialized at home, particularly among children from minority groups (Phillips, 1972; Heath, 1983). The usefulness of these findings is that they offer an alternative perspective on educating minority children: the researchers propose teaching methods which are more inclusive of other cultural views. There is always considerable distance between theory and practice, and ethnographic research offers an

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approach to bridging that gap by learning what happens in practice; this knowledge is then potentially applicable to future theory.

Setting

The focus of this study is a classroom in a public middle school located in South Philadelphia. The houses immediately surrounding the school are row houses, many in Philadelphia's traditional 3-story style. Many of them are abandoned, averaging one or two per block. Two blocks to the east of the school there is a large high-rise public housing project, where a significant portion of the students live. The majority of the remaining students live in nearby row houses. The area is predominantly residential, although there is a large supermarket just across the street from the school, and a few convenience stores and small businesses in the area. The immediate community is predominantly African-American, and of a lower to middle socioeconomic class.[2]

The school spans one square block, and, despite overcrowding typical of many other inner-city public schools, comfortably holds its students. Inside, the front hallway is immaculately clean and very quiet, and has shiny marble floors and high ceilings. There is a security guard (not a police officer) to meet visitors at the door; there are no metal detectors. The school is equipped with a large, traditional public school auditorium, gym and recreation facilities, lunchroom, library, and home economics rooms.

This study took place in a classroom located in a quiet corner of the second floor. The room is spacious enough to hold its 26 seventh-grade students, who sit in clusters of 4 to 5 desks. The class is multicultural: the ethnic composition of the students is 56% African-American, 33% Asian and Hispanic,[3] 11% Caucasian, and the teacher is an African-American woman.

Method

For the purposes of this study, two seventh-grade classes, both taught by the same teacher, were observed for a total of nine hours. Because the teacher teaches both English and Science classes to the same students, both subjects were observed. Research methodology entailed observing regular classes while in session. No observations were done on days when the teacher was absent or when students were being tested. The researcher acted as a participant-observer (although "observing" more than "participating"). Children asked me for assistance when they were working independently, so it appears that they thought I was a teaching assistant. Observations were analyzed based on written notes

and transcripts of tape-recorded classes. Additionally, two informal interviews with the teacher were conducted.

Ethnic Pride

The multicultural population of the class is of particular significance because the teacher has made a major theme of the class "Ethnic Pride".[4] By doing so, she acknowledges that differences exist between her students; she incorporates these differences into the curriculum of her classes. This seems to be in direct contradiction to the traditional role of schooling, which has been to assimilate children into mainstream culture. This point is clarified in a recent *New York Times* column by Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers:

> there is a belief that a majority minority population will demand radical changes in our society. This depends on whether immigrant groups continue to consider themselves as set apart from the mainstream or start seeing themselves as Americans (1993:E7).

Shanker's comments place a separate minority group identity in opposition to his definition of "American." By encouraging her students to develop and strengthen their sense of ethnic identity, however, it appears that this teacher's conception of America is different: to her, pride in one's own ethnic identity is compatible with being American. This is innovative ideology, particularly f Albert Shanker represents the viewpoint held by most educators. One could assert that hers is also an approach to creating social change in which the 'melting pot' conception of assimilation is replaced by an emphasis on separate ethnic identification.

The theme of ethnic pride manifests itself in observable classroom norms and rules of behavior, as well as in course content. Examples of such norms include participation structures, which pertain to "rights and obligations for participation" (Cazden, 1986:434), and norms that specify which linguistic forms are appropriate given the context. These norms are enforced by the teacher through classroom rules she has created. Additionally, the following description attempts to account for behavior the teacher allows in her class, and how it relates to her theme of ethnic pride.

Rules of Participation

Turn-Taking

A component of the ethnic pride theme is the importance of *respect*. The rule is that people must respect one another in the classroom, which affects how members of the class speak to one another and when an individual may speak. For example, a student may not

interrupt someone else who is speaking. One day in English class, the students recited poems they had memorized. While a given student recited, the other students were required to listen silently. This rule was clarified after a student's poem was interrupted by the laughter of his peers because he mispronounced a word. The teacher reiterated the importance of being "supportive and respectful" of one another in class, particularly when taking on the task of oral recitation.

Another example of what happens when turn-taking rules are violated occurred during a Science class in which students were doing independent group work. While a boy (S1) in one group was reading aloud, another boy (S2) demanded that he be given the book. However, S1 was the designated reader, and had the right to read. The reader said, "Hey, you're not respectin' me, man." This example shows that the students have absorbed the teacher's language and made it their own.

In writing about classroom discourse, Cazden notes a study which shows that speaking out of turn ("chiming in") is acceptable "only during the instructional climax of the lesson at school" (1986:439). This is not the case in this classroom. Rather, during instructional class time the teacher asked questions and students were permitted to call out the answers without being called on to speak. Some students chose to raise their hands, but not doing so was also permissible. This did not take place during the 'instructional climax' of the lesson, but when the teacher was asking questions for which she already knew the response. However, students were not allowed to chime in if they were interrupting; that would break the turn-taking rule delineated above and be considered disrespectful. In this way, the discussion is limited to one speaker at a time and order is maintained.

Register

One linguistic expression of respect is the use of a formal or polite register when conversing. This is also a rule that the teacher enforces in her classroom. The following transcript involves the teacher (T) and three students (S1, S2, and S3):

S2: [to S3] Shut up!
T: What's the problem?
S3: [points first to S2, then to S1] She tryin' she talkin' every time [S1] tryin' to read...
T: Alright, stop. You don't do that. You're not listening. That's why you're telling him to shut up? He's telling you to stop talking? What would have been a better way to have handled this?
S1: They could have been listening to me read.
T: Alright. If she's the reader then you keep on listening to her...that's number one. And then number two, we don't tell people to shut up. Be quiet. We ask them to be quiet. (4/13/93)

This interchange shows that the use of the informal command, "Shut up," is considered impolite. By telling students instead to use the more formal command, "Be quiet," the teacher is communicating that students speaking about academic matters in her classroom must remain in a polite register, even when speaking with peers. Using polite language indicates that the speaker respects the interlocutor, which is required in this classroom. Using polite language in school also teaches students that choosing a register is related to appropriateness, and informal language is not appropriate in every situation.

Topic Initiation and Control

In addition to permitting chiming in, the teacher is also flexible in lesson topics. One day during a Science class on ecosystems, a discussion on the environment caused the topic to shift to how to improve the school environment. Most of the students offered suggestions, and it was eventually decided that the class should write down their ideas in letters to Constance Clayton, the head of the Philadelphia Schools.

The teacher also offers her students choices at times when she could simply dictate decisions to the class. For example, when the students were assigned to memorize poems, they were allowed to choose their poem from several options. In this way, the teacher controlled the overall course content (because she chose all of the possible poems), yet left room for some student control. Another such example was in Science class when the students, who were to work in groups on projects, were allowed to choose the people with whom they wanted to work.

The teacher describes her rationale for giving her students these choices when she chides them for spending too much time dividing into groups:

> It's important in life to be able to have choices. And you have to learn how to deal with having choices when you're young, so that when you become an adult, you can make some wise choices when you have to make them. Don't ruin your opportunity to have choice (4/13/93).

In this speech, the teacher uses this example to express the value of choice and stress that it must be appreciated. Her words can be taken to indicate that opportunity derives from choice. Moreover, there seems to be an underlying message contrasting choice with oppression: because oppression is often equated with a lack of control and choice, feeling that one has choices is a way to resist feeling oppressed.

The teacher stated in an interview that she also tries to teach her students to be independent of her as much as possible. The motto written on the banner outside her classroom is "Student as worker, Teacher as guide." To teach autonomy, the students often work independently of the teacher in groups. They also must know how to find information on their own, which requires doing research. One time while students were

doing group work, a student asked the teacher a question about tundra. Rather than respond, she sent the student and his group to the library to find the answer on their own. This is another way that the teacher shares classroom power and control with her students.

This is potentially empowering to a minority group member who has experienced oppression and prejudice against them. For example, permitting students to chime in gives them more control. The following citation elaborates upon teacher-fronted classrooms: The teacher has the power of control. As the central figure in the class, the teacher transfers, channels, and controls the flow of information. (Harel, 1992:155) By allowing the students to call out responses without the teacher choosing and calling upon a student to speak, she allows her students more control over the `flow of information' than in a standard, teacher-fronted class. This is empowering to students who have been trained in other classes, mainstream settings, or at home to "speak only when spoken to"; they can feel in control of the class discussion.

The significance of creating a classroom situation in which the students are empowered is the possibility that they will take that empowerment with them outside of the classroom. Freire's (1990) method of teaching illiterate people to read in Latin America evoked the following response (Shaull, 1990):

> And as those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed, they are no longer willing to be mere objects...; they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society which until now have served to oppress them. (15)

In the same way it is possible that, by teaching students ethnic pride and making them powerful in the classroom, they will be less tolerant of marginalization once they leave.

BEV and Ethnic Pride

A particularly interesting classroom norm pertains to the usage of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in the classroom.[5] From observations, it seems that there are certain times when using BEV in the classroom is acceptable and other times when it is unacceptable. The distinction is related to the content of the discussion. When students speak with the teacher about academic matters, using BEV is unacceptable. The following quotations from class serve as examples:

Ex 1

S: I don't got that one.
T: You don't got that one?
S: I don't have that one. (3/24/93)

Ex 2

S: Ain't the ocean blue?
T: Ain't?
S: Uh, isn't the ocean blue? (4/13/93)

In these instances, the teacher corrects her students simply by repeating their words back to them. The students immediately understand how they must correct, presumably because these interchanges are habitual. The teacher, who is African American, predominantly speaks Standard English in the classroom and requires her students to do the same.

Likewise, during the less academically-oriented class when they discussed how to improve the school environment, usage of BEV by students contributing their opinions was not corrected. This seems to indicate that BEV is forbidden from more formal, academic topics, but permitted during casual or personal discussions. It appears there is a connection between BEV usage and informality, Standard English usage and formality.

In an informal interview the teacher stated that she corrects her students' English when they use "slang" speaking directly to her during classtime.[6] However, she told me that she will not usually correct her students' language when they are speaking privately to one another. As the teacher explains, "It's okay to use that language with their friends, but you need to know how to use correct English when going in for a job application or interview." The teacher acknowledged that people hold negative stereotypes of BEV when she said that any applicant who applied for a job using BEV with their potential employer would "find their application in the trash." She also placed a negative value judgment on BEV when she said that her students need to know "correct" English; this implies that BEV is incorrect. This teacher is not alone; Speicher and McMahon (1992) discovered that other African-Americans also hold negative views about BEV or feel it is inappropriate in certain contexts.

By telling students that BEV is appropriate in certain contexts but not in others, the teacher is educating her students to practice codeswitching. Additionally, the contexts in which it should and should not be used are consistent with DeBose's findings (1992) about codeswitching by African-Americans. As DeBose states, "BE [Black English] speakers consider SE [Standard English] the appropriate code for use with outsiders or in *mainstream* settings, and consider BE appropriate for *ingroup* use among African-Americans" (161). In this classroom, SE is the appropriate choice because school is a mainstream setting. It is also appropriate for children to use BEV when speaking amongst themselves. It is worth noting here that use of BEV is not limited to only the African-American students in the class, as students of other ethnicities use BEV grammatical structures such as double negation, and lexical items such as "ain't" or "dag."[7]

There are several possible explanations for why the teacher discourages the use of BEV in formal classroom conversations and how this relates to her classroom theme of ethnic pride. First, there is the fact that Standard English is the language code associated with power in the United States, whereas there are many negative stereotypes associated with BEV. It is possible that she wants to empower her students by teaching them SE so they may be able to access the power structure, and use SE when it is in their "best interest" to do so (Speicher & McMahon, 1992:397). A knowledge of SE is also frequently associated with the African-American middle class (DeBose, 1992:158), so that knowledge of SE seems to some a requirement for attaining social status. The movie "Trading Places" offers an example of the connection between SE and power. The actor Eddie Murphy, a homeless character at the start of the film, suddenly becomes a wealthy businessman. One of the changes in his character is that he develops perfect SE to play the role of a rich, African-American man. Such examples fortify the belief that if African-American children learn SE, it is more likely they will become affluent.

The complaints about the outcome of the case of the Black English trial in Ann Arbor[8] argue against special treatment and acceptance of BEV in school. One part of the resolution was that teachers would learn to distinguish between mistakes in reading and differences in pronunciation due to dialect (Labov, 1982:193-4). Yet this implies teachers should treat speakers of BEV in isolation from speakers of SE. Given the Green Road parents' negative responses to the outcome of the trial, it seems what they wanted was to stop prejudice against their children, not prevent them from learning SE. It is possible that educators today believe parents want their children to know SE, and therefore insist that BEV not be used during formal classtime.

Additionally, there are negative stereotypes associated with BEV speakers. People believe that not using the marked variety helps to eradicate prejudice against its speakers. Saville-Troike elaborates this point: "There are many in US society who feel that language markers help perpetuate inequalities in the social system, and that language can be changed to eliminate the inequality" (1989:36). This helps explain why the teacher focuses special attention on correcting grammatical structures that mark BEV such as "ain't" and "don't got," as mentioned previously.

While there is evidence that teaching SE in school promotes empowerment and therefore ethnic pride, it is also problematic; others would argue that correcting BEV could be damaging to a student's sense of ethnic pride. For example, Saville-Troike states that the language of young African-Americans serves as "a vehicle for identification and solidarity" (1989:86). Telling students that it is inappropriate for them to use their language in

mainstream society sends a message that the group with which they identify is also somehow inappropriate or wrong.

Addressing the treatment of nonstandard dialects in school, Burling writes about the burden which teaching only SE places on children whose native dialect diverges from the standard. "Our educational system has persuaded many children to reject their own heritage and to adapt their language to the demands of society, but it is difficult to exaggerate the personal and psychological cost of this adaptation" (Burling, 1973:131). Given that bidialectalism is desirable for African-Americans living and working in both African-American and mainstream society, then it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of the minority language in education. Emphasizing the standard language alone may be psychologically damaging to speakers of nonstandard dialects; the speaker may come to believe that his or her mother tongue is insignificant or embarrassing. While it seems that the teacher corrects her students' use of BEV in class to increase their chances for life success and ultimately their self-esteem, doing so creates a tension. While doing formal work in mainstream settings such as school, the students are pressured by teachers to use SE, and forced to decide between one or the other: BEV or SE.

Course Content and Ethnic Pride

The theme of ethnic pride in this class, and the teacher's desire to develop it in her students, also carries through to course content. For example, a major upcoming project is entitled "Ethnic Pride." The project includes researching one's family tree, writing about a family member who is a hero or mentor to the student, learning about foods typical to the country of ancestry, etc. In the past, the teacher has found that this project brings the children together because they find they have ancestry in common with other students that they did not know about. Another assignment with a similar effect is when the entire class reads a book about a Jewish boy; none of her students are Jewish, so the teacher feels this teaches the children to relate their own experiences to those of children from different backgrounds.

Afrocentrism

Although the students read texts by authors of different ethnicities or races, the primary principle of the English class is the presentation of materials from an "Afrocentric" perspective. In his book on Afrocentric ideology, Asante (1987) writes that the Afrocentric approach seeks to lessen the prevalence of traditional Eurocentric ideology existing in the majority of academic fields as the sole ideology. Asante's argument against Eurocentric thinking in academic disciplines is that it is not universal and that it differs from "the

African view of reality" (1987:4). He defines Afrocentricity as follows: "The crystallization of this critical perspective I have named *Afrocentricity*, which means, literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior" (1987:6). In U.S. public schools that are predominantly African-American, Afrocentricity has been a recent trend in modern approaches to school teaching. At the Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia, for example, an Afrocentric curriculum was employed with the hopes that it would help children better relate to their school experience, and therefore foster learning (Green, 1990).

One of the ways that educators have incorporated Afrocentric ideology into the classroom is by using texts written from an Afrocentric perspective. Such texts include revised Social Studies books; for instance, that present information from an Afrocentric view, e.g. through the eyes of a slave in America or with greater focus on African historical figures. Afrocentrism can be carried into all disciplines, including Science and English.

In this teacher's English classes, the syllabus incorporates texts written by African-Americans or Africans which promote an Afrocentric viewpoint. For example, one class was observed in which students recited poetry (Appendix A). Although all four poems were written by African-Americans, only two were distinctly Afrocentric in content: "African Poems" and "My Pa was never a slave" are Afrocentric because the former is about African people and the latter about slavery. The students were assigned one or two poems of their choice and were instructed to memorize them for homework and then recite them in class. The two poems which are Afrocentric in content were the most popular; they were selected for memorization and recitation by 73% of the students.

Perhaps because Afrocentricity was not part of my own school experience, it was remarkable for me to hear these poems being recited. It was even more remarkable to hear the poems being recited by students who are not African-American because I was conscious of the importance of race in the content of the poems, and therefore noticed the racial contrast between the text content and the students. During one class period, the poetry selection for recitation by the non-African-American students was recorded. Of the ten non-African-Americans who recited during that class, nine chose Afrocentric poems. It is difficult to understand fully what caused these children to make the choices they did, and it would be an interesting area for future research. I would argue that they chose these poems because they were the most popular among the other children: of the 19 children in the class who read that day, 14 chose to recite Afrocentric poems. If Afrocentric poems were chosen because Afrocentrism is popular, an additional question is, "Why is it popular?" Does it relate to teacher expectations or politics of ethnicity?

Further, regardless of popularity, an important question relates to how an Afrocentric curriculum affects the students in the class who are not African-American. It seems as though it would affect them in the same way that a uniquely Eurocentric curriculum affects African-Americans; in this situation it is students of non-African descent whose perspective is not represented. Asante recognizes this potential in the following excerpt:

> However, in the sense that Afrocentricity proposes a cultural reconstruction that incorporates the African perspective as a part of an entire human transformation, critical theory suggests a pathway. It does not lead us down the path, because it is trapped in the quicksand of its own ethnocentric view, but its attack on the traditional ideology of empiricism is "right on" (Asante, 1987:5).

In other words, although Asante agrees with the criticism of Eurocentrism, he recognizes that Afrocentrism is equally ethnocentric. Therefore, his Afrocentric model seeks to combine Afrocentric elements with other perspectives. Perhaps this would be the more effective approach for dealing with the diverse needs and special interests of students in a multicultural classroom.

Conclusion

The teacher's ultimate goal is to empower her students and instill in them a sense of ethnic pride, even though her approach in certain examples may be debatable. The teacher has chosen to utilize her multicultural classroom to educate and empower her students, rather than view their diverse demands as a burden. Additionally, her focus on empowerment and ethnic pride is a modern approach to helping minority students in school, which goes beyond a strictly linguistic method. Rather than only targeting the language of her students as the cause of their disadvantage, the teacher carries her ideology into many different facets of learning.

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1 "'Ethnography of schooing'...refers to educational and enculturative processes that are related to schools and intentional schooling, though this concept leave room for studies of playgrounds, play groups, peer groups, patterns of violence in schools, and other aspects of school-related life" (Spindler, 1982:2).

2 Socioeconomic class is defined here by income and educational level.

3 These statistics are based solely on observations, so Asians and Hispanics are in the same group because it was difficult to determine accurately which category a given child fit into.

4 "Ethnic Pride" is the term that the teacher used herself in conversation about her classroom ideology.

5 Whatley states that BEV is characterized by phonological features (final consonant simplification and deletion), grammatical features (aspectual or invariant BE), and lexical or semantic features (e.g. the use of 'man' as a form of address, words such as 'rap, and 'jive') (1981: 100-102).

6 "Classtime" is the teacher's terminology for time spent doing formal course work, and shall be used hereafter by that definition.

7 In this class, `dag' is an exclamation comparable to `wow.' For example: "Did you read all that? Dag!" or, "Dag! You not bein' nice" (quotations from class).

8 In 1977, when Michigan Legal Services learned that black students, who comprised 13% of the predominantly white student body of King Elementary School, were doing exceptionally poorly in school they, along with the students' parents, brought a federal suit against the King School, Ann Arbor School District, and Michigan Board of Education. The focus of the suit became the fact that the students had "language barriers" which the defendants had not attempted to overcome. The plaintiffs won with the following educational outcomes: 20 hours of inservice training for teachers to learn about the history and characteristics of BEV, methods for identifying speakers of it, ways to distinguish between dialect difference and reading mistakes, and strategies for helping students switch from BEV to standard English (Labov, 1982).

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Appendix A

Andre

by Gwendolyn Brooks

I had a dream last night. I dreamed I had to
pick a mother out.
I had to choose a father too.
At first, I wondered what to do.
There were so many there, it seemed,
short and tall and thin and stout,
But just before I sprang awake, I knew
what parents I would take,
And this surprised and made me glad:
They were the ones I already had!

My People

by Langston Hughes

The night is beautiful,
so the faces of my people.
The stars are beautiful,
so the eyes of my people.
Beautiful, also is the sun,
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

From *African Poems*

by Don L. Lee

We're an African people
hard - softness burning black
the earth's magic color our veins,
an African people are we,
burning blacker softly, softer.

Note: *My People* and *African Poems* were memorized together

My Pa was never a slave

by Harriet Wheatley

Slave?
My pas was never a slave
And those
who thought
they made him a slave,
didn't
understand
the word.
He saw beyond the cotton fields
and
cornfields
that blinded their eyes',
Beyond the valleys, dark with
their sins, the sunrise,
They
could not conceive. This,
Pa knew
This, I know.

Lineage

by Margaret Walker

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil,
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories
smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
with veins rolling roughly over quick hands.
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong,
why am I not as they?